

Proving Historical Fiction

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I have found the American Memory collections to be useful for many different classroom activities. While I use specific lessons on the site, I also like to provide opportunities for my students to explore the site. One of the most successful ways is through the activity below.

During a class study of the industrialization era following the Civil War (1880-1920), I have my students read novels related to this time period. These novels include:

- *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith
- *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair
- *Land of Hope* by Joan Nixon Lowery

Throughout the reading of the novels, I ask the students to look for examples of conditions of the time period. When students have completed their novels, we take large sheets of paper and work in groups to identify the conditions depicted in the novels. We usually come up with a sheet listing living conditions, working conditions, economic conditions, and political conditions.

Students are then directed to the American Memory collections. Their job as researchers is to use the collections to find evidence as to whether conditions depicted in the novels are historically accurate. For example, students might find pictures of tenements similar to the ones where Francie lived in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. The students may use the suggested site below or the search page to locate their sources.

Touring Turn of the Century America
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/detroit/dethome.html>

American Memory Search Page
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mdbquery.html>

I have used this activity successfully as a group project and also as an individual project that students complete at home. They have found some amazing evidence in the American Memory collections. I always provide class time for students to share the evidence they have found. We then discuss students' conclusions about whether the books are historically accurate.



Family in an attic home with drying laundry.

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/detr:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(det+4a28102\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/detr:@field(NUMBER+@band(det+4a28102)))